

Anti-homosexual legislation – the bushfire in Africa

By Mark Barwick and Alfiaz Vaiya, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (31.03.2014) – The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung organised on 26th March a roundtable discussion on its newly-released report on *The Political use of Homophobia: Human Rights and Persecution of LGBTI Activists in Africa*. The report analyses the growing phenomenon of anti-homosexual legislation in African countries and the use of legal measures to suppress Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersex (LGBTI) persons. Several LGBTI activists from Africa were present and gave testimony at the event.

The project is part of the foundation's gender strategy which seeks to take an intersectional approach toward various policy areas which impact international development cooperation. Co-author Rita Schafer gave an overview of the report, accusing several African governments of promoting homophobia over the last twenty years through legislation and media outlets in an effort to deflect 'legitimacy crises' in their respective countries.

Schafer also observed that the passage of anti-homosexual legislation was being supported in part by fundamentalist Christian missionaries, coming predominately from the southern United States. The dehumanisation of LGBTI people through legal restrictions against homosexuals has led to LGBTI people being targeted in all parts of daily life, including at home, in school and at work.

LGBTI activists from Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa, Malawi and Ghana spoke of the dangerous environment that LGBTI persons face in their countries. Anti-homosexual legislation is now 'spreading like a bushfire,' across the continent, said one speaker, and urgent action is needed.

Any response should be grounded primarily on principles of democracy and equal treatment of all people. LGBTI people are not looking for 'special treatment,' affirmed another speaker, but the same treatment that is afforded any other member within a democratic society.

The activists called on the EU to follow up its statements with concrete actions. Development aid could legitimately be reduced or cut, particularly financial support that is presently going directly to governments. Instead, more support should be directed to civil society and independent human rights organisations that are favourable toward LGBTI rights.

It was agreed that the EU must also do more to support LGBTI activists in Africa, not only for individuals but also by facilitating the creation of networks for purposes of more collective analysis, telling their stories and collaboration on common interests. This could also take the form of building capacities of smaller LGBTI associations that find EU funding procedures too daunting to apply for funding.

Even still, participants noted that more liberalised legalisation is not the only concern for LGBTI people in Africa. South Africa, for instance, has the most progressive legal climate on the continent for homosexuals, but the struggle for equality and social acceptance remains.